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What will art galleries look like in the future?

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Infinite Curve by Kit Webster, for White Night Melbourne at National Gallery of Victoria last year.
Picture: John Gollings

What will art galleries look like in the future? Will we even recognise them as something that looks like a museum?

In the 1960s, a French curator envisioned a mechanised museum where conveyer belts brought paintings to visitors who sat passively in viewing boxes. In this way, “a thousand visitors will be able to see a thousand paintings without leaving their seats”.

The scheme testifies to a rather naive notion of what people may want from the art institution of the future: sheer volume of experience. It also testifies to the fact, whatever new gadgets have been added to the museum experience today, it hasn't been nearly so transformed by technology as one may have expected.

Technology is reformatting all kinds of old habits: how people get around cities, how they socialise, how they fall in love. It would be very weird if it didn't change how people looked at art.

The dialogue between art and technology is not new, of course. Indeed, you can think of painting and sculpture as technologies for capturing reality, telling stories, grabbing attention and stimulating emotions.

When, in 1859, American painter Frederic Edwin Church showed his monumental landscape painting *The Heart of the Andes* in New York, based on his travels in South America, it was a media event. About 12,000 people paid the equivalent of \$7 to gaze on the theatrically lit panorama, scrutinising its exquisitely rendered details through opera glasses. Contemporary accounts describe people as dazzled and even overpowered by the image.

What is the equivalent today?

Consider honestly the landscapes of video games such as *Dark Souls* or *Destiny*. Strip away any condescension about pulp content. In terms of a modern-day “sublime” — the combination of intensity, vastness and awe triggered by Church's painting — it is difficult to see any painting compete with the breadth, detail and imaginative intensity of these digital worlds.

And the vividness of these experiences is not even the most important thing about them; it is how the experience is delivered: in the home, without having to go anywhere. The sublime can be had on demand.

When it made its debut in 2007, the iPhone was considered so awesome that it was dubbed the “God device”. Less than a decade later, smartphones are a banal fact of life, offering all the internet's resources of distraction at all times. And, according to a Deloitte report, the amount of time Australians spend watching films or television has risen to about

17.2 hours a week. That's the equivalent of two full months a year spent consuming media.

Art galleries must fight for relevance on such terrain. Museums are refitting themselves digitally to take advantage of the continuous latent connectivity of the audience — although this puts them in the position of making flashy, distracting mobile technology the key to the relatively old-fashioned experiences of art.

Lately, a greater focus on hip contemporary art over historical work has helped to maintain audience interest for museums. Yet it is less and less clear what special competency even the most tech-savvy artists bring to bear in the context of digital culture.

“All this stuff out there made by all these people is probably better than the stuff I'm making,” digital artist Cory Arcangel admits in the recently published book *Mass Effect*, which tackles art and the internet. “How do I deal with that?”

How indeed? Here is a prediction based on this state of affairs: We can expect two possible futures, with the museum experience stretching in opposed ways.

One glimpse comes from Silicon Valley. The big commercial art galleries have been trying to crack the problem of what may pique the interest of tech's newly minted millionaires, who so far have not been sufficiently impressed by the highbrow charms of art.

One of the biggest galleries, Pace, thinks it has the key, recently opening an outpost called Pace Art + Technology in San Francisco with the work of teamLab, which makes interactive light environments.

It has attracted *Heart of the Andes*-style crowds. In truth, however, teamLab is not an artist or even a group of artists. It is a company. The Japanese group employs something like 400 animators, programmers, engineers, mathematicians, architects and designers to realise its nifty installations. Even Marc Glimcher, the head of Pace, has admitted that his first reaction to teamLab was, “This is not art.”

So, one future has art merging with interactive design, and museums becoming more and more like amusement parks to cater to a distracted audience.

The other path is to try to make a virtue of the slower pace of traditional art. Entire industries these days are being built around meditation and “mindfulness”. It is not hard, then, to see museums turning “slow art” into a selling point — in theory, at least.

“The desire to unplug opens opportunities for museums to flaunt one of their classic strengths, as places of contemplation and retreat,” argues a report from Centre for the Future of Museums. In fact, April 9 was International Slow Art Day, when art lovers were asked to seek out five works with which to spend 10 minutes each: a demand whose modesty shows how frenetic our relation to images has become.

Can museums embrace the Tate’s slogan of “the digital as a dimension of everything” and simultaneously make themselves available as spaces for “digital detox” without tearing in two? This will be one of the artistic challenges of the near future. New kinds of institutions and new kinds of art are likely to emerge along this fault line.

Ben Davis is national art critic at Artnet News. He is speaking at a forum, Art and the Connected Future, at the National Gallery of Victoria on April 16.